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Evolution Ethics

Chas. M. Melden

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Evolution Ethics.

Chas. M. Melden.

The doctrine of evolution possesses strong fascination for certain minds. Its apparent simplicity, its broad generalizations, and its exalted claims are very attractive. It proposes to explain the universe by a single formula. Its advocates have only to utter this magic word and all mystery vanishes, every phenomenon is accounted for, and the mind rests in the assurance that the reason of all things is reached. As formulated by its authoritative expounder, Herbert Spencer, "Evolution is a change from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity through continuous differentiations" and

integration."[1] Of this formula Goldwin Smith says: "The universe may well have heaved a sigh of relief when through the cerebration of an eminent thinker it had been delivered of this account of itself."[2] Grant the fact of the persistence of force, and the evolutionist claims through the application of this formula to account for the universe as it is, without the necessity of invoking other agencies. By a continuous development it has advanced from primeval star-dust to its present state with its various and complex phenomena. Religion, sociology, and psychology, as well as physics, are explained by the interplay of matter and motion.

It was not to be expected that in so comprehensive a scheme ethics

1. Data of Ethics p. 65.
2. Contemporary Review Feb. 1882. p. 349.

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should be omitted, and Mr. Spencer and others have devoted themselves to showing its application to moral phenomena. "Being forced to do this by finding that they form a part of the aggregate of phenomena which evolution has wrought out. Of the entire visible universe has been evolved, — if the solar system as a whole, the earth as a part of it, the life in general which the earth bears, as well as that of each individual organism, — if the mental phenomena displayed by all creatures up to the highest in common with the phenomena presented by the aggregates of these highest, — if one and all conform to the laws of evolution, then the necessary implication is that those phenomena of conduct in these highest creatures with which morality is concerned

also conform."[1]

We are glad to acknowledge the honesty of purpose of Mr. Spencer in his desire to give to the world a basis of morality. After so much that is merely subversive and destructive of the sense of ethical obligation emanating from that source, it is refreshing to find at least an honest attempt at something constructive. In so far as he succeeds in showing a rational and scientific reason for pure, upright, and unselfish conduct we accord him our gratitude and reckon him our ally; nevertheless while we may endorse many of his practical conclusions, we are obliged to question the soundness of the philosophical principles upon which they rest. The reason for this will appear from subsequent criticism.

1. Data of Ethics. p 63.

An examination of the system of evolutionary ethics will rob it of its supposed novelty. In spite of a different name, and slight change in apparel, we recognize in it an old and familiar friend. In one form and another it has been with us since the day of Epicurus. It is only Hedonism with a new title and with certain additions made to it in the attempt to reconcile the conflict between empiricism and intuitionalism. The new factor is a race experience. This is supposed to account for the existence of the moral judgment which thus becomes a priori for the individual, while it is a posteriori for the race. The essential characteristic, however, of the old doctrine that conduct is determined by feeling, and is good or bad as it is pleasant or painful,

is adopted as the guiding principle of this new school. A moment spent in tracing the history of this principle through its various modifications will make this plain, and hence will not be wasted.

The morality of pleasure has had no bolder champion or abler advocate than Epicurus. "The intellect is entirely corporeal," he says,[1] "and pleasure is its good." Pleasure is the beginning and end of human life. While admitting a certain choice amongst pleasures, he affirms that the great thing is to avoid pain. In order to do this he would have his disciples retire from public life and ignore as far as possible social duties. He seeks, also, to remove the idea of a future life and a divine judgment. The practical outcome

1- Quoted by Pressensé

of his doctine was, that sensual gratification took precidence amongst his followers who doubtless deserved the charges which Horace brought against them. Epicureanism furnishes the basis of modern utilitarian ethics, which, with various modifications and enrichments, has been advocated by Hobbes, Helvetius, Bentham, and Mill.

The common characteristic of this school is that virtuous conduct is a means to an end. It is this in which its utility consists. All agree that pleasure, either the individuals' own or that of the greatest number, is the end to be sought. Bentham unblushingly declares that self-interest is the only motive powerful enough to influence men. "I have accepted as my guide," says he, "the principle of

interest and I will follow it wherever it may lead me." Utilitarianism, according to Bentham, is systematized selfishness[1]. Even apparently unselfish acts are performed because of the reflex benefit they yield. "Social virtue is the sacrifice which a man makes of his pleasure to obtain by serving others the maximum of pleasure for himself." We judge of conduct alone by its results, and from them construct our code. "Nature," says our author, "has placed man under governance of two sovereign masters, pain, and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong and on the other the chain of cause and effect

1- Quoted by Dressensé - p. 370-

are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think; every effort we make to throw off our subjection will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. ---- The principle of utility recognizes this and assumes it for the foundation of that system the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and fear."[1] In his thorough going application of this principle Bentham scouts the idea of duty as anything different from self-interest, and declares that the only permissible use of the word ought is that "it ought to be banished from the vocabulary of morals." He tries to save his system from absolute selfishness by showing that one's own greatest happiness can

1. Quoted by Martineau Types of Ethical Theory 2nd Vol. p. 305.

be found in ministering to that of others; but as we shall show farther on, it is impossible for such a doctrine to command obedience in the presence of great and overmastering temptations to gratify one's own desires.

The sanction which Bentham's scheme lacked, Mill thought he had found in his doctrine of the association of ideas. He, however, holds as tenaciously as his predecessors that virtuous and pleasurable actions are identical. "The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals utility or the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to promote the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and absence of pain; by

unhappiness pain and the privation of pleasure."[1] Pleasure is the only worthy end of action.

These quotations are sufficient to show the fundamental harmony between the utilitarians and the advocates of the evolution theory of ethics. For as H. Spencer says, "No school can avoid taking for the ultimate moral aim a desirable state of feeling called by whatever name, - gratification, enjoyment, happiness. Pleasure, - somewhere, at some time, to some being or beings, is an inexpungable element of the conception."[2] Leslie Stephen says: "I repeat that pain and pleasure are according to me, determining causes of action. It may be even said that they are the sole and ultimate causes. They are sole causes in this sense, - that when two

1. Quoted by Matineau - p. 308.
2. Data of Ethics. p. 46.

courses of conduct are otherwise possible and the choice of one depends upon the agents own decision his will is always determined by the actual painfulness or pleasurableness of the choice at the moment of choosing and there is no different kind of a motive. They are ultimate in the sense that it is impossible to analyze pain and pleasure into any simpler element."[1]

So far there is nothing to distinguish between the new and the older utilitarians. They all belong to the greatest happiness school. However Mr. Spencer marks a broad difference between himself and his predecessors, and claims to have made a distinct advance upon their work in the use he makes of the experience of the race transmitted

1. Science of Ethics p. 50

by inheritance to the present generation.

Leaving this peculiarity for subsequent treatment, it shall be our present task to consider how far the general doctrine of hedonism can be justified. One cannot read the works of Herbert Spencer and his sympathizers without being impressed with the fact that with them the great end of living is life itself. Ethics is the science of self-preservation; conduct is right or wrong as it conserves or fails to conserve physical well-being, "According as its specific acts, well or ill adjusted to specific ends, do or do not further the general end of self-preservation.' The pleasurable is identified with life-preserving conduct, and the painful with the opposite. "Every pleasure," says

1- Data of Ethics- p. 23-

Spencer, "increases vitality; every pain decreases vitality. Every pleasure raises the tide of life; every pain lowers the tide of life." Leslie Stephen also affirms, "The useful in the sense of pleasure-giving must coincide with the useful in the sense of life-preserving."[2] Indeed this author, in his elaborate treatise, sums up the discussion by affirming that morality consists in the good health of the individual and of the "social tissue."

Both these men animadvert with greatest severity upon all who, for a fancied ideal, forego physical gratification. "Nature," says Leslie Stephen, "wants big, strong, hearty, unpeptic, shrewd, sensible human beings, and would be grossly inconsistent if she bestowed her highest reward of happiness upon

1- Data of Ethics- p. 87.
2- Science of Ethics- p. 83-

a bilious, scrofulous, knock-kneed saint merely because he had a strong objection to adultery, drunkenness, murder, and robbery, or an utter absence of malice, or even highly cultivated sympathies." He seems to lack all appreciation of those higher and purer delights to which the spiritually minded have testified, and for which they have gladly practiced the self-denial so strongly condemned. Happiness resolves itself into mere pleasurable sensation; - a comfortable physical state is all that is to be desired. It would seem, then, as if a pig, sucking his swill with satisfied grunt, had attained unto the acme of happiness.

These men, in affirming that Pagan and Christian ascetics consider pleasure as harmful and pain as

1 Science of Ethics - p. 409 -

beneficial, show how completely they misunderstand the motives which actuate these classes. They are not opposed to pleasure as such, but mistaken as they may be and excessive in their self-discipline, their purpose is simply to overpower, if they cannot eradicate, those passions and appetencies which tend to degrade and bestialize them. Their aim is the attainment of an ideal perfection. Even admitting their mistaken view of life, the average insurance agent would scarcely hesitate longer in assuming a risk on the members of a religious community than upon the devotees of sensual gratification. If self-denial has slain its thousands, self-indulgence has slain its tens of thousands.

Equally unfortunate is the

Spencer in the witnesses he produces to prove the dire effects of this pernicious heresy. As he marshalls them before us they present a most incongruous company. "The careworn man of business --- the cadaverous barrister --- the feeble factory hand --- the unhealthy seamstress --- flat-chested school girls --- peasants crippled with rheumatism." There is but one characteristic common to all these,- viz. a neglect of the laws of health; and this, from the stand-point of biological ethics, constitutes their immorality and involves them in the same condemnation. "For it matters not to the argument whether the actions entailing such effects are voluntary or involuntary. It matters not from the biological point of view whether the motives prompting them

1. Data of Ethics- p. 94-

are high or low. The vital functions accept no apologies on the ground that neglect of them was unavoidable or that the reason for the neglect was noble." This, as a statement of physical law, is doubtless correct, for that law is inexorable and disregards motives, but it is not true as a principle of ethics, for we have ever distinguished and shall ever distinguish between motives. We will laud the man who, in a noble cause, incurs suffering, and will blame the man who, through sin, ruins his health.

Moreover, Mr. Spencer seems to over-look that it is by application of his own theory that many of his chosen witnesses have involved themselves in disaster. The ruined athlete, the overworked student, and the broken down business man

1. Data of Ethics p. 95.

sacrificed health in the pursuit of the pleasure which they thought their course would bring. Far was it from their thought to act upon the principle that pleasure was harmful and pain beneficial, and as for the others, poor souls, they doubtless seized with avidity upon every opportunity for pleasure brought within their reach, and enjoyed it to its fullest extent. From his own showing it is not always true that pleasure increases and pain decreases vitality, the exigencies of evolution to the contrary notwithstanding. And even from the stand-point of self-preservation the pleasure theory of morality is seen to be inadequate and inconsistent.

If, however, we grant the soundness of the greatest happiness

theory of morality, we yet shall find grave difficulties in applying it as a rule to human conduct. It is no easy task to determine what constitutes the greatest happiness of an individual or community. We lack sadly a common standard of measure. Pleasurable sensations arise from so manifold causes, and those produced by the same causes differ so much in different people, and in the same people at different times, that it is impossible accurately to determine their quantitative value. How are we to balance the pleasure of a saint with that of a debauchee? How compare the gratification of hunger with that of pride, the joy of paternity with the undisturbed ease of bachelorhood, exultation over an enemy's

defeat with gratitude for my friend's rescue from death? There is no measure of comparison for these pleasures. Bentham's test of duration, intensity, fecundity, purity etc. fails. We cannot make it practical. Its very complexity is sufficient to render it inoperative. Besides, the well-known facts of human nature are against it. The course of action which at first yields an exquisite joy, by frequent repetition soon loses all power to move us. The food which delighted our gustatory nerves yesterday, to-day, because of a disordered stomach, occasions us great distress.

By affirming that men act solely from motives of pleasure the utilitarian ignores that large part of our conduct which is purely

instinctive. A multitude of acts are performed without the slightest regard to the amount of pleasure they will yield; and if there is gratification attending them it is simply the result of instinct attaining its end. Aristotle, long ago, pointed out that it was the natural impulses of men which determined their pleasures, and not vice versa, saying "It is not true of every virtue that the exercise of it is attended with pleasure except indeed the pleasure of attaining its end." Pleasure thus becomes the consequence and not the motive of human action.

Furthermore, it is impossible for the hedonist to escape from the thraldom of selfishness. It is true that the later advocates of

this system of morality have sought to do so, but their success has been purchased at the expense of their logic. The demand is made upon the individual to give up his own pleasure for the sake of increasing that of others. But it is hard to make the average man see that his pleasure does not count for as much in the aggregate as that of his neighbor. Why, then, should he forego it? Moreover, his neighbor's happiness is remote in time and place; his own is here and now; the former's is contingent, his own is certain, and it will require greater benevolence than most people possess to act as disinterestedly as the theory demands. They will argue that "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

This failure to furnish an adequate basis for altruistic action is a fatal defect in every hedonistic system. By many it has been recognized, and much ingenious reasoning has been employed to remedy it. Bentham attempts to show that self-interest and public-interest are identical. Herbert Spencer labors to prove that though egoism must take precedence as a principle of conduct, yet in the perfected evolution of society it is seen that it and altruism are one, and that individual welfare is conserved in the general well-being of society. Leslie Stephen finds an escape from an all-engulfing egoism in the welfare of "social tissue" which it is for the individual interest to promote.

These examples of altruism are only an emasculated egoism. The passage from 'each for himself' to 'each for all' is not made so easily. The insistence which has been put upon the individual's own happiness as his chief concern prepares him to sacrifice the public interest when it conflicts with his own, and the attempt to show that the two are identical can succeed only by a feat of psychological legerdemain. The individual must be made to believe that the glow experienced in the moment of enthusiastic devotion to some fancied good of others, involving hardship, suffering, perhaps death, is a sufficient compensation for the immunity from these sacrifices which a more prudent, if more selfish course would

yield. Regulus finds in the approval of his sense of honor a recompense for the excruciating agony experienced as the burning sun glares into his lidless eyes. Unless he had a higher motive than pleasure it would seem as if he had made a mistake. The Irishman was wiser who declared he would rather be a live coward for five minutes than a dead hero all his life.

A subtler theory has been advanced by Sidgwick.[1] He seems to think it possible for selfishness and unselfishness to be reconciled, or at least that the former may by degrees be transformed into the latter, so that though one starts with self-love he shall become so absorbed in the pursuit of others' happiness as to forget himself, and

1. Method of Ethics. pp 133 + 4.

labor disinterestedly in their behalf. This author fails to note that the basal proposition of utilitarianism is destructive of his whole theory. If men are purely selfish to start with, whence the motive to incite them to the line of conduct he supposes? Will such men enter upon a course involving sacrifice and suffering simply to know the delights of disinterested action? Not until darkness and light cease to be mutually exclusive.

There can be no doubt, however, that men do voluntarily sacrifice their present ease and comfort for the good of others. They seek to realize the Christ ideal, and give, hoping for nothing in return. Sidgwick's proposition, "A man cannot both wish his own happiness and be willing to lose it"[1]

1- Method of Ethics- p. 134-

has been disproved in a thousand acts of unselfish and heroic devotion to some worthy object. Leslie Stephen, in a lucid moment, saw this. He says, "There is scarcely any man, I believe, at all capable of sympathy or reason, who would not in many cases unhesitatingly sacrifice his own happiness for a sufficient advantage to others. Almost any mother would die or expose herself to sufferings which can never be repaid for the good of her infant; and though maternal love affords the most perfect example of devotion to others, and is, of course, much stronger than most other benevolent feelings, I think that the same principle is illustrated even in these commonplace acts of good nature of which almost every man is capable."[1]

1. Method of Ethics. pp. 432-33

Now we affirm that not the hope of greater pleasure but a stern sense of duty is the motive which dominates men and impels them, irrespective of personal advantage, to a righteous course of conduct. To deny this is to deny one of the most clearly revealed facts of human experience.

It is here that the distinctive feature of the evolution ethics appears. Its advocates admit and emphasize this imperative sense of obligation, but account for it not as an original element of the moral nature, but as a product of experience reaching illimitably into the past during which pleasurable actions as life-conserving have acquired an authoritative sanction, and painful actions as life-destroying have been placed

under an equally authoritative prohibition; the former are approved as right, the latter are condemned as wrong. "The experiencies of utility, organized and consolidated during all past generations of the human race, have been producing nervous modifications which by continual transmission and accumulation have become in us certain faculties of moral intuition, certain emotions responding to right and wrong conduct which have no apparent basis in the individual's experience of utility."[1]

Thus by a turn of the wrist the sensations of pleasure and pain are transformed into conscience, firmly established upon its throne. This which to some may seem a difficult feat is a

1. Spencer to Mills.

very slight thing to men, who, like Herbert Spencer, are able to deduce every psychological phenomenon from matter and motion as the original factors in the process. As long as we do not question him, Spencer succeeds admirably. With mighty strides he presses onward, past all such unimportant matters as the origin of life and consciousness. Trifles like these do not move him nor impede his progress. He steps over the gaps between the inorganic and the organic, between the unconscious and the conscious, as easily as Gulliver crossed the streams in Lilliput.

It will appear, however, upon an examination, that his confidence is not well-grounded. His system, at this point, is saved only by his assumption of facts which he does not prove. To say

nothing of the question of the origin of life, his account of the rise of consciousness is plainly inadequate. Indeed it is not an account at all, but only an assertion. In speaking of the necessity of a common center of communication to receive impressions given by the senses he says, "So that as the external phenomena become greater in number and more complicated in kind, the variety and rapidity of the changes to which the common center of communication is subject must increase — there results an unbroken series of these changes — there must arise a consciousness."[1] In order to meet the exigencies of his theory he thus quietly assumes the rise of consciousness where there had been before only changes and a common center of communication. The

1- Psy. 2nd. Vol. p. 403.

passage from the unconscious to the conscious is taken without even a sign that there is any more difficulty involved than in passing from one physical change into another.

It is just here that we press our demand for a solution of the problem presented by the phenomena of consciousness. While physical changes may afford the occasion for its rise, they in no sense can be said to cause it. The impossibility of accounting for the mental in terms of the physical has been recognized by thoughtful minds always. Tyndall voices the convictions of many, when, after affirming that the brain is the organ of man's reason and sense, he says, "Here, however, the method pursued in mechanical science ceases

to an end, and if asked to deduce from the physical interaction of the brain molecules the least of the phenomena of sensation or thought we must acknowledge our helplessness. The association of both with the matter of the brain may be as certain as the association of light with the rising sun. Whereas in the latter case we have unbroken mechanical connection between the sun and our organs, in the former case logical continuity disappears. Between molecular mechanics and consciousness is interposed a fissure over which the ladder of physical reasoning is incompetent to carry us. We must accept the observed association as an empirical fact without being able to bring it under the yoke of a priori deduction." Thus, though he recognizes in matter the

1- Pop. Science Monthly. Jan. 1879-

promise and potency of all life and thought, he does not see how this promise is to be fulfilled or the potency to be made actual.

Mr Spencer thinks to escape the difficulty by removing it into the dimness of remote antiquity. The relief is apparent rather than real. for, travel back as far as we may, wherever we meet the phenomena of consciousness they are as clearly defined as such and as necessary of explanation as those we know here and now. The appeal to a sub human consciousness we rule out. We deny the validity of the processes by which he attempts to explain by the facts of animal psychology the phenomena of the human mind. He reverses the true order, for the actions of his cat and dog become intelligible only as he interprets

them in terms of his own consciousness. This same remark applied to his so called "sub human justice." It is simply human conceptions of justice and equity read into the actions of animals. There is and can be no proof that they have any idea of this quality. We are concerned with human beings and limit the field of discussion to them. The advantage of extending the time of investigation would perhaps be greater and more substantial if it were the same consciousness which endured and developed through the ages: but it is not, and while heredity may account for the transmission of many physical traits, and for peculiar nervous organizations which determine the character of mental action, it cannot account for its origin. As far back as we may go we find the two classes

of phenomena, mental and physical, distinct, with, as Tyndall says, no bridge connecting them.

The moral judgment, like the idea of causation, is an intuition, a part of the original furniture of the human mind. Mr. Spencer's attempt to show that the former is the product of development fails as lamentably as it failed in the latter case. He seems to think that since a false cause is ascribed to an effect, the idea of causation does not exist. His illustration of the savage who ascribed his fall to a malicious demon simply shows that the victim mistook the cause of his accident. He knew that there must have been a cause for it. That he did not understand the law of gravitation did not invalidate the conception of causation.

Mr. Spencer and his school are equally confused in their treatment of moral intuition. They confound the principle with its application. Because conscience does not deliver a perfectly formulated and uniform code of action for all men, its validity is questioned. Spencer seeks to show the absurdity of trusting to it by a series of illustrations which, when the true doctrine is understood, are seen to be irrelevant. He affirms, "By the (intuitional) hypothesis the wrongness of murder is known by a moral intuition which the human mind was originally constituted to yield." He then seeks to put his opponents in a dilemma by citing the case of a savage who deems it meritorious to take human life. It is not claimed that

1. Data of Ethics. p. 39.

conscience tells us what kind of conduct is right and what is wrong. It simply bids us do the right as we know it, and this sense of obligation is in the savage as well as the Christian. Conscience is judge and not legislator. It pronounces upon motives and not upon actions. The Fijian takes the life of an aged father with the same motive that leads a Christian child to care most tenderly for a parent similarly dependent. The difference between them is not in the possession or lack of conscience, but of knowledge and circumstances. If we could understand the motives of men, the moral jindgment would be seen to be the same for all.

While the principle of action

is innate, its application is a matter of wisdom and experience. Thus a moral code is formed. No one who is acquainted with the various and conflicting rules of conduct cherished and observed by men can fail to see the necessity of some authoritative standard. Some rule of absolute right is an imperative want. Mr. Leslie Stephen says, "Evolution seems to imply that absolutely pernicious instincts are eliminated in the struggle for existence."[1] This accords with the general principle of the survival of the fittest. That conduct is right which in the long run maintains itself strong and vigorous. But by the application of this rule it is exceedingly difficult to tell what is right and what is wrong. For today, even as three thousand years

1. Science of Ethics p. 302-

ago, the "wicked flourish as a green bay tree", evil still has a mighty grip on the world, and there seems no immediate prospect of its being relinquished. Lying, swearing, and stealing are not attended with direct and fatal consequences. Error still thrives though its head be hoary. The diabolical seems endowed with endurance as marvelous as the angelic.

If we are to have an infallible standard of right and wrong we must look not to evolution but to revelation. If God has not spoken we are hopelessly at loss. It is only as he whose essential nature is righteousness declares himself that we may hope to know the true rule of life. If he utters the objective command

which conscience bids us unconditionally obey on pain of its condemnation.

The approbation or disapproval of conscience is very different from the satisfaction or regret experienced from success or defeat. Its voice is independent of all such considerations. It bids one do the right whatever the consequence, and condemns without mercy any departure from the highest and purest rectitude. It counts no suffering too great, no burden too heavy, no pain too severe as the price of its approval. It is a Nemesis to every transgressor. Says Seneca, "The greatest punishment of sin is having sinned." Let us recognize that evil actions are avenged by conscience. Nothing equals the torment which it

causes; for its blows fall heavily and unceasingly." The self-denial and suffering which it demands in the performance of duties cannot be justified upon any ground advanced by biological ethics. If materialism is true, then he is the happiest who tramples conscience under his feet and stifles its behests. Its imperative commands become reasonable only as we broaden our horizon, until it includes another life, when the losses of this, incurred in loyalty to right, shall be compensated. Man as moral must also be immortal.

Man as moral is also free. Biological ethics denies this. It has no place for voluntary action; what it calls such is only in seeming. Everything is

1- Epistle- 97-

necessitated. "Freedom of will," says Mr. Spencer, "did it exist, would be at variance with the beneficent necessity displayed in the evolution of correspondence between the organism and its environment."[1]

The fact of conscience, however, demands what the exigency of this system denies. Obligation involves power to do. Ought implies can. To affirm the contrary is to do away with all merit and demerit. These can be predicted only of voluntary action. We do not praise or blame a machine, but we do, men. The reason is that we know a man might have done differently. He has the power of choosing between motives. This in a word is the true doctrine of human

1- Psychology 2 - p. 533

freedom.

The evolutionist attempts to confute it by an appeal to the law of causation. He becomes rigidly logical in its application and affirms that every act is an effect of some antecedent cause. He thus plunges into an infinite regress. Now we affirm as stoutly as he the doctrine of causation, but affirm also that the free agent is himself the cause of his own act and has the power of originating action. To deny this and to seek constantly a cause for a cause is practically to deny the doctrine of which so much is made. Every world theory must postulate a first cause, itself uncaused. With just as much reason we may affirm the introduction of new causative acts

at various points of the world's history. The testimony of our consciousness is that we have the power of originating action; that we are not coerced by external necessity but are free to do or not to do as we please.

When Mr. Spencer admits that every one is at liberty to do what he desires to do, (supposing there are no external hindrances) he comes far over toward our standpoint; nevertheless he fails to comprehend the true position, as shown by the affirmation, - "The real proposition involved in the dogma of free-will is that every one is at liberty to desire or not to desire."[1] No advocate of the doctrine claims this. According to him, since action is determined by desire, and that is beyond our control, all conduct

1- Psychology- Vol 2- p. 500.

must be necessitated. Here his psychology is false. While it is true that desires are largely independent of the will, and that they stimulate action, nothing is more clearly established than that men may act contrary to desire, and that the volition is stronger as the intensity of the desire to be overcome is greater. To follow desire is to descend to the level of the mere animal. To control, repress, and choose between our desires is to rise to the dignity of manhood.

The truth of the doctrine of freedom may appear more clearly if we notice its relation to reason itself. We have brought into the mind a confused mass of material which must be arranged and systematized if any definite and valuable knowledge

is to result. In order to do this the thinking subject must have the power to select, reject, and classify this chaotic mass according to the law of reason. The whole process implies his freedom. Not that he can coerce his conclusions, but that he can reach a sound conclusion only as he is master of his own mental activities. By a strange, though not unusual inconsistency, determinists admit this. They speak of thinking twice, of suspending judgment, &c. An automaton does not act thus but moves straight on, impelled by necessity. We affirm that as the mind is able to determine its own action by the law of reason, it is able, also, to determine its action by the law of duty. To deny one is to deny the

other, and both reason and morals are overwhelmed in common disaster.

There is, however, a school of determinists who speak of voluntary action, of merit and demerit as familiarly as any champion of freedom could wish. Leslie Stephen says, "Determinism is not only consistent with a belief in merit and moral responsibility but it is implied at every step by the belief."[1] And again, "Merit can belong only to voluntary actions."[2] This sounds well, but on examination we find that the improvement is only apparent: with them, as with other necessitarians, conduct is coerced. The chief difference is that instead of external compulsion ruling one in spite of his will, it is claimed

1- Science of Ethics. p. 279-
2- Science " " p-271-

that the will itself is determined in its choices. "I assume," says the author already quoted, "freedom in the sense of freedom from external force wherever I assume merit because internal force accounts and must account for all that part of phenomena of which external force does not account."[1] This internal determining force is character. It is this which decides the will. The individual does and must always choose according to his character. His act is as much the necessary fruit of his character as the fruit is of a tree. A certain type of character must produce, inevitably, its corresponding kind of conduct. There is some truth in this position. Doubtless one's conduct is in harmony

1- Science of Ethics - p. 281 -

with his character, but the deeper question arises, how shall the character itself be accounted for? These men affirm that it is formed by circumstances operating on the natural disposition. In the one case the result is a pure and upright, and in the other, a cruel and licentious character. If this be true then merit and demerit disappear. The good man is no more to be praised for his goodness than the bad man for his badness. As the product of necessity they both are alike destitute of moral quality. The fallacy of this whole school is in affirming that the will is determined in its choices. There is no such causal relation as they allege between the will and motive. The latter

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is the occasion of action and not its cause; the motives do not decide the will, but the free spirit decides between motives. This is a fact attested by the universal conscience. We know we are free to do or not to do as we may elect. It is this which gives moral quality to our actions and constitutes their merit or demerit.

We are, however, far from affirming that human freedom is unlimited. We have certain natural qualities, physical and mental; we are thrust into peculiar circumstances, receive certain intellectual and religious impressions, all of which enter into and affect our lives. Our only contention is that there is nothing in these which prevents the exercise of a free choice. They afford the

raw material upon which we seize and which we build into our characters according to the ideal we have formed. Thus our characters are our own achievement, and if, as is doubtless true, our actions are in a sense determined by our character, we know that we ourselves have created the determining principle. That which we spontaneously perform to-day was once a matter of deliberate choice. It is only thus that the responsibility for character which Leslie Stephen affirms can be justified. It is not the product of environment acting upon a plastic and passive subject, but the work of a free spirit utilizing or prostituting opportunity and circumstance, thus perfecting itself in the beauty of holiness, or sinking from the

earthly to the sensual and devilish. Whatever our character, it is our own achievement.

We are here met with an objection that to will does not always include power to do. "To will is present but how to perform that which is good I find not" is the language on many lips; some content themselves with simply a tacit approval of the right without putting forth earnest effort to realize it. This plainly is wrong. It resolves virtue into a simply moral judgment and leaves the will, like Othello, with occupation gone. Conscience never excuses us in such a course; it demands that we accomplish every duty and does not condone failure. Yet there is

truth in the scripture quoted, for it is impossible for one to attain unto his loftiest ideals without help. Divine assistance must be given to supplement human weakness and enable men to reach the high standard required by an enlightened and Christianized conscience. We are both free and dependent. The sense of moral obligation leads us out of and beyond ourselves into prayerful and hopeful reliance upon the Author of our being.

Even this brief examination of the evolutionary theory of ethics reveals the untrustworthiness of its foundations; the baneful effects which would naturally flow from it are avoided only by one of the happy inconsistencies to which, in practical affairs, men

owe so much. This, however, is not safe. While in certain minds moral distinctions are kept clearly defined and authoritative, the many will certainly be guided by their depraved tastes. False theories pave the way for wrong practice. The hedonism of the evolutionist can never bear so perfect fruit as the sense of moral obligation insisted upon by the intuitionalist. The one bids us help and bless others that our own happiness may be increased; the other, with a genuine altruism, bids us do good unto all men as members of the same universal brotherhood. The one lacks, utterly, authoritative sanctions, the other points forward to an eternity of bliss or woe as the consequence of moral uprightness

or obliquity. The one destroys human responsibility, the other affirms it upon unmistakable grounds. The one leaves us in the dirt of a gross materialism, the other leads us to the throne on which sits and rules the Father of men.